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ABSTRACT

There are many important reasons for including black theatre as part of an interdisciplinary approach to the humanities. One of the most important reasons is that black theatre provides nonblacks, as well as blacks, the opportunity to gain knowledge about the black experience. Black theatre reflects the sociology, politics, economics, religion, and history--in short, the total experience--of blacks. It provides nonblack students with a means of studying the experiences of people in other cultures. Black theatre also meets the demand for relevant studies, and it helps to restore to blacks the self-esteem that has been eroded by continual exposure to nonblack theatre and education. Although it has been argued that the interdisciplinary approach and the inclusion of black theatre in the curriculum reflect a tendency to teach too many subjects without providing sufficient depth of learning, once students are introduced to the totality of human experience, many will return to study individual subjects in depth. (GW)

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A PLEA FOR FUSION: BLACK THEATRE AS A PART OF THE INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO TEACHING THE HUMANITIES

Winona L. Fletcher

At my request, I was given the final slot on this panel. There is something about being LAST which is symbolic of the topic of Black Theatre as an academic discipline within the humanities. Most of you will have already grasped this symbolism and I need not dwell on this point; suffice it to say that while theatre in general fought a long struggle to gain academic respectability (and some administrators still have doubts), Black Theatre has not yet been accepted by some people as a thing that even exists. As evidence of that, let me share this experience. In a survey made by me about 5 years ago, one respondent refused to complete a Black Theatre questionnaire; instead he simply wrote in large letters across the form: "THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS BLACK THEATRE: PEOPLE LIKE YOU WHO SEND OUT QUESTIONNAIRES LIKE THIS ONLY STIR UP MORE CONFLICT." I knew then that as a Black Theatre practitioner my work was cut out for me--even as it obviously still is here today.

It is inevitable that we should be here discussing theatre as a part of an interdisciplinary humanities program. In the next few moments I hope to focus on why I say it is inevitable--that is in terms of the dictates, influences and directions of American education in general and of theatre specifically--and to zero in on the values and justification of Black Theatre as a part of the theatre which goes into the humanities program.

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Finally, I will try to anticipate a few of the criticisms and shortcomings that this stand is sure to arouse, and to try to convince you that the gains will far outweigh the losses.

Most of us have studied enough history of education (or have lived long enough) to have watched the giant pendulum of change swing from extreme to extreme in educational philosophies and practices. We have seen ceaseless efforts of renovation and expansion of the curriculum through fruitful and barren experimentation. We have felt the spell cast on us by the impact of the pure and applied sciences and then experienced the removal of the veils by humanistic psychologists who led us down the path of encounter group idealogy. We have seen the protectiveness of departmentalization lead to over specialization and then watched the devotees of the general curriculum ride the pendulum to an extreme position characterized by absence of any centralized control. We have seen the "ivory tower" converted into the "watch tower" (in the words of University of Michigan John Brubacher). Most recently we have been deafened by the rallying cry for "curriculum relevance," and have felt the increasing pain of attempting to give all education a utilitarian purpose. We have seen subsultures and counter-cultures emerge and demand a place in the educational system. And as educators, we seem now to be standing hopelessly by watching the alienation of man from man increase with horrifying rapidity.

Because theatre people boast of a sensitivity, an awareness and concern for others, I say it is inevitable that we should come together now to seek ways of fusing our human experiences in

a systematic way that can lead to improved education for our society.

The case for theatre has been adequately stated by my colleagues. The case for Black Theatre needs a few special arguments. Let us begin with the cry for relevance.

People, especially those most annoyed by the cry, usually associate the demand for "relevance" to the Civil Rights, Black Revolution and related movements of the late 50's and 60's only. Most of us are shocked, therefore, to learn that when the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education polled 70,000 students, they discovered that 91% wished for greater relevance and 71% of the faculty polled agreed. Black studies was perhaps the most visible evidence of instant relevance--to be sure. But the activism of the 60's provoked a great deal of earnest thinking by academicians in general. We here today are living evidence of that. Unfortunately Black Studies, of which Black Theatre is generally a part, created its own brand of polarity and devisiveness.In its rush to establish an identity, to emphasize its uniqueness, sometimes black studies overlooked the fact that the American educational system had not only denied the black man knowledge about himself, but that in its neglect, non-Blacks were also denied this knowledge. Black Studies and Black Theatre should never have been perceived as being only for Blacks. The learning and "unlearning" process which it affords is as necessary a part of the education of non-Blacks as it is of Blacks. This is, perhaps, one of the strongest arguments for getting Black Theatre into the curriculum of the humanities.

As I understand it, the interdisciplinary approach encourages a grasp of the over-all significance of the way various parts of

a culture interact; it stresses what is important for everyone to know and concerns itself with how the basic conceptualization of different disciplines can be linked together.

Its ultimate goal is to transcend the limits of the individual components and to encourage thinking that is organized in terms of broad, interrelating ideas. At the end of this thought, I have to think back to recall if it was the interdisciplinary approach--or Black Theatre I was describing. The two so closely approximate each other. I shall return to these "principles."

But let me interrupt this line of thought momentarily to illuminate the concept of Black Theatre. Need I convince you that there is such a thing as Black Theatre or more accurately "drama and theatre of the black experience?" Spokesmen for the black aesthetics insist that Black Theatre is an art form with distinct identity different from dominant white theatre. If you have trouble dealing with that notion, think on this one. The majority of black Americans have had markedly different experiences in culturally significant ways from those of white Americans. It seems logical to expect that their cultural expressions of these experiences would therefore take on different forms--thus Black Art. While you're still warming up to that thought, let me emphasize this. Black Theatre is not separated from life; it is a functioning, integral part of its society, not a cultural appendage. This is its African heritage. Theatre is the most functional of art forms; its subject matter is <u>live</u> people in real-life situations. You cannot talk about Black Theatre without talking about sociology, politics, economics, religion, history--everything.

It was indeed these ramifications which caused Black Theatre to shock, revolt, hurt, anger (and to educate, I hope) Americans in the last two decades. The clue to Black Theatre is inter-relatedness. Is that not also the clue to the interdisciplinary approach we propose here for the humanities?

Let us return now to the argument for "relevance." While most of us have grown weary of the overuse of the term, there is validity in the thinking which it sparked. Certainly, at least to most black Americans of the 60's, anything aimed at a disembodied culture and divorced from the realities and problems of their world had questionable value--and still does. Black Arts' rejection of the "mainstream" reflected this. Spurred by the black movements, students through-out the nation became obsessed with the utilitarian value of education; social efficiency became more and more the yardstick for measuring the value of education.

Living in America--a culturally diverse society--demands greater awareness of and sensitivity to those unlike ourselves. Have you ever read Richard Wright's NATIVE SON or the drama based on it? It should be mandatory reading. As an example of what Black Theatre can do, it packs more "living in America" in three hours than most people experience in a life-time. Nowhere can be found a more accurate and moving revelation of the interlocking complexities of the factors which jointly create our social problems. Santayana once defined intelligence as the "ability to see things as they really are." If our goal in the humanities is to produce intelligent,thinking, caring human beings, we must provide students with mirrors of our polycultural society. And as a

little "aside warning"--we must guard our tongues carefully less such phrases as "cultural deficiences" slip out in place of "cultural differences." In addition to relevance for all, Black Theatre is "relevant" to the black man because it helps to remove the frustration, alienation, powerlessness, and low self-concepts which non-Black theatre and education have laid on him. Esteem is a basic need of all human beings--the restoration of it through any and all means possible is necessary before openness, trust, concern for others (the effect of the humanities) can be exhibited. Actually, our goal should not simply be to get a specialized course in Black Theatre into the humanities curriculum--but to integrate every general course with contributions and culture of Black Americans. Yet, we must tread lightly here. Until we seek and obtain integration in the individual--not just in the curriculum, we may open ourselves up for further trouble and for criticism from those who disagree with our stand.

And what criticism might we anticipate? Surely the eclectic flavor of the interdisciplinary approach and of Black Theatre is a vulnerable spot. Those who see education as synonymous with "depth of learning" will shoot holes in us for spreading ourselves too thinly. We must prove to them that by addressing ourselves to the totality of life, to achieving a syntheses of various factors, we gain more than we lose. Once a meaningful whole is perceived, curiosity will lead many to return to the individual parts for greater specific knowledge.

As might be expected, "relevance" lends itself to criticism, particularly from those who still yearn for the return of the scholar in the ivory tower. I would be the first to agree that

unless we establish sound and sensible standards for determining relevancy, then chaos and a scattering of effort will result. Yet, there is no going back to an education that ignores the cries of our contemporary society. It is foolhardy to believe that we can. It is also foolhardy to believe that we have all the answers here today. Black Theatre, like American education in general, remains in a state of dynamic evolution--in the act of becoming.

My primary aim has been and is to make you aware of some of the values to be derived from including black drama/theatre in the humanities as we consider teaching the humanities from an interdisciplinary approach. I see the interdisciplinary approach as a kind of recycling of learning--establishing a continuum between several different disciplines; I see Black Theatre as a kind of learning which may never have been a part of the cycling process in the first place, but which has the advantage of being committed from its conception to the principle of interrelatedness. It is indeed the child of the fusion of many disciplines. By whatever means necessary--specialization, integration, even assimilation, (as long as Black Theatre does not lose its own unique identity) it simply must not be left standing in the wings during the main action of education in the late 70's and the decades to come.